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THE POOR PEOPLE OF PARIS

What Was Learned of Their Habits and Home Life by a Tour of Inspection.

They Are More Self-Respecting than the Poor of London—Food and How It Is Obtained—Obstacles in the Way of Matrimony.

Special Correspondence of the Sunday Journal.

PARIS, Dec. 14.—The public ball-rooms of Paris have furnished many a salacious morsel for American readers. They are still in full blast, and, judging from the photographs one can see in a hundred windows of this city, they are still presenting nightly to Parisian youth the same old scenes of female indecency. We were recently, however, in one of these rooms which is now used for a totally different purpose. The gallery is there, from which in former years the eyes of lust looked down upon dancers whose attitudes and movements ministered to the lowest passions, but these galleries are occupied now by those seeking a better life, and are adorned in front with mottoes from the Holy Word. On the ground floor we find now, instead of the gay votaries of vice, a decent assemblage of middle-aged dames, with a bright intermingling of innocent, clean-faced childhood. It is a mothers' meeting, held under the auspices of the great McAll. The women are all poor, but they look very clean and remarkably intelligent. Most of the two hundred have brought their knitting with them, and the diligent plying of their needles, while a young lady reads to them some wholesome story, is a reminder to us of how, in the gathering storm of a hundred years ago, the women of Paris used to knit into their work the names of those whom their revolutionary vengeance had marked for the guillotine. But what a change since then, we reflect, and how delightfully suggestive is the scene we now behold of the revolution which is quietly going on in these days in the morals and habits of these Parisian women.

In our visit to this interesting place we were chaperoned by a gentleman whose knowledge of the poor of this great city has been gained by many years of self-sacrificing labor for their advancement; and when we saw over the door of this erstwhile ball-room "Salle New York," indicating that the work done in this particular locality was backed by American means, we felt quite sure that what our guide could tell us and show us of lowly life in Paris, and of what is being done to redeem it, would be as welcome to the better class of American readers as other and less innocent views are to readers who delight in having scandal and vice described to them.

A SELF-RESPECTING CLASS.

"The poor of Paris," began our friend—"well they are not so vulgar, not so brutal, not so drunken as the poor of London. They are more self-respecting, and will make altogether a better impression upon you." This was the opinion of one who is proud of old England as his native country, and it is a view which is fully borne out by our own observations. "How do they live? Well, to begin with, they have scarcely any home comforts. That's why they are on the streets so much. Of fire they have next to none, and lights the same. The candle or two they may keep about are brought into service only when some one drops in. Cooking? Why, the very poor hardly ever do any. They get their food from the numerous little shops where meat and vegetables are sold ready for the table. Cheap? No, meat is not, unfortunately, but vegetables are, and these form the staple of their living. Perhaps, by the way, you've visited the great markets and have noticed the stalls there where plates of cooked edibles are sold at 4 sous (4 cents) a piece. These are eagerly snatched up as special delicacies. They are scraps from the tables of the wealthy. How collected? Well, it is something of a mystery, but there they are, and it is generally supposed that they are obtained for a trifling bounty through the servants."

So our friend talked on, and occasionally, as we jogged together through the narrow and crooked thoroughfares in the neighborhood of Rue St. Antoine, he would call our attention to something particularly squalid or ancient in our surroundings. We should not find here, he said, many of the very poor. It was not the worst part of the city, but it approximated to that distinction, and it had some features not to be found anywhere else. The district is known as "Old Paris." Before the time of the Grand Monarch the French nobility dwelt in this quarter. What were palaces then are now either magazines of trade or common tenement houses. Several mediæval towers were pointed out to us, one of which is associated with the murder by the Duke of Burgundy of the brother of a French king. We saw, also, the old palace which for long years was the residence of the archbishops of the Seine. Now the courts of this vast structure resound to the tread of poverty, and its massive stairways are climbed by those who seek in hunger rooms which are bare and cold. For the narrowness of some of its thoroughfares this part of the city—which, by the way, is seldom seen by visiters—is without an equal. A small alley was pointed out to us as the narrowest street in all Paris. It is not more than a yard and a half in width, and only that its name, with the ubiquitous "Rue," is plainly given on the walls of its high buildings, you would not suspect it of being a street at all. But we saw several not more than three yards wide. On either side, too, were the inevitable five and six-story dwelling-houses. Which moves us to remark that the poor of Paris are worse off than the poor of London in some respects. They certainly have less light and a deal more climbing to do. This, because the dwellings are so much higher. We are still of the opinion, and in fact are more fully confirmed in it, that for the necessity of stair climbing it imposes, Paris beats the world. In this matter poor and rich are sufferers almost equally, and one wonders that, with such decided revolutionary tendencies, the people here have never yet taken up arms against tyrannical architects.

IN THE HOMES OF THE POOR.

Our kind chaperon was too much occupied with good work for the poor of Paris to give a whole afternoon to the mere task of showing an inquisitive American where and how they live. Hence he mingled business with pleasure, so to speak. In other words, he had made out a calling list, and, fortunately for us, we were to share these domiciliary visits. But still he talked. "One thing about the working people of Paris," he said, "is very noteworthy and highly commendable. They wear their own clothes, not the cast off finery of the rich, and what they wear is neither ragged nor dirty." We had thought as much and remarking upon the large number of women who go about the streets bareheaded, our friend observed. "That is a matter of economy. See the same people on a bright Sunday or other gala day or at a place of worship and you will find them looking quite differently. A neat bonnet will appear, and as for the men, they must be low down indeed not to have a respectable suit for holiday wear. But they understand economy. They are different in that respect from the poorer classes in England. The bonnet, which costs something and looks well, must be taken care of and made to last. So with the best suit of the man. Hence these are not worn except on great occasions, and never when it rains."

"The last uprising of the Commune," we suggested, "was it shared in activity by the people among whose abodes we are now moving?" To which our friend replied that it was not. "The working people here are scattered about amongst classes that are better off. Consequently they have less opportunity to become clannish. Their social views are modified somewhat by their surroundings. The really dangerous classes are in places like Belleville, where vast hordes of workmen are huddled together, and where the spirit of these toiling thousands, aggregated and solidified, is a dominating power in social and municipal life." All of which was exceedingly instructive: but just here we followed our friend into the hallway of a tenement, and the ever watchful concierge, or porter, having been satisfied as to the propriety of our intentions, we groped our way up five flights of stairs. The building had formerly been a mansion, and so thick was the bannister that to clasp it with the hand as a help to our ascent was impossible. But it was so dark and the ascent was so steep that we could hardly have gotten along without some help of this kind. Hence it was a relief to find that landlords in this quarter had been required by law to attach to these ancient railings a thinner rail of iron. By such assistance as we got from one of these we found ourselves at last in the apartment of a Paris workman, one who, unfortunately, had been out of employment for some time, with a sick wife on his hands.

Here was the abode of honest poverty. It was a single room, but was made double by curtains. The curtains were an exact match in color and pattern for the blue tinted wall-paper. This was only to be expected, for to combinations and matches—the little things which indicate a prevailing taste for the beautiful and artistic—the poor of Paris are as passionately devoted, within their means, as the rich and leisured. The apartment was rented as a furnished one for 8 francs a week, but the furniture was anything but abundant, and the bedstead was of a plain iron pattern. In its size the family was a typical Parisian one. It consisted of a bright-looking girl of ten years. The working people of France, we have before remarked, are economical, and here is a practical illustration of the sort of economy on their part which is giving so much trouble these days to the social scientists of this country. Kind words from the good missionary, with a short invocation, introduced by the familiar "notre pere," a hearty bon jour, which means "good day," and a hand-shake, which meant to the bonne dame that she would be better off thereafter to the extent of a modest silver coin. So began and so ended our first visit. It was brief, but it gave a touching view of French home life, and a delightful insight into the good work of Protestant missionaries in this city.

A BIT OF ROMANCE.

Another call had an element of genuine romance in it. We were forewarned of the situation, but the curious denouement was quite unexpected. "Don't trouble yourself if the good woman cries a bit," our friend had said. "She's poor, and she's in trouble. A man wants to marry her, but he's out of work and I'm discouraging the match. My visit to-day is for that special object." Here were grand possibilities opening before us, and we entered the apartment prepared for anything, as we thought, and yet hardly prepared for what really took place. The woman was fat, not fair, and much beyond forty, but she was tidily dressed, and in her trim black cap looked matronly enough to be not only a wife, but the mother of a lot of olive branches.

In what took place during this visit we were imposed upon, owing to our imperfect knowledge of French. But though the language deceived us our eyes did not. We were quite sure that we saw a third man enter the apartment, and that, after an introduction to the visitor from America, he proceeded to make himself very much at home. We were sure, also, that there was a general and very animated conversation, and that the new comer, in sustaining his own special part therein, became nervous and had recourse frequently to his snuff-box. We also heard a little prayer, and, as we had been forewarned, saw a woman in tears. Then we saw the good dominie sign a paper, and afterwards he read from a familiar-looking book what sounded very much like a familiar benediction. Then parting salutations were exchanged, and afterwards, when the court-yard had been gained, the astonishing explanation came.

Actually this kind of clergyman, while swearing he'd ne'er consent, had consented on the spot. He couldn't help it, he said, because they pleaded so eloquently. "We're both poor," the man had urged, "and we are both miserable as we are. She goes home and finds no comfort; I go home and there is no comfort for me. Let us share our miseries and see if in that way we may not lighten them." So the man, happening to drop in, had urged his suit—with such success, too, that the paper which had been signed was the document which will be presented to the Mayor, by and by, as the last preliminary in the civil features of a French marriage.

"So there are some marriages in France where the bride brings no dowry," we remarked; to which he replied that, of course, there were such weddings among the poor, though even with the poorest there would be a strict inventory of the little belongings of the two parties, and the bride would have a dot really, or what would be considered such, though she brought to the union only the clothes she stood up in.

DIFFICULTIES IN THE WAY OF MARRIAGE.

"But marriage—marriage," said our friend, "is made so difficult in France that it is no wonder there is widespread concubinage. The formalities of the law are outrageous. Many are the Frenchmen who have said to me that had they known beforehand what annoyances they would have to submit to, they would not have undertaken it. My own daughter was married to a Frenchman, and here is what I had to do. To satisfy the authorities that the girl was not some French damsel wishing to evade the customary requirements in such cases, I had to get her certificate of baptism. This had to be translated by a sworn translator, and the prefect of police had to swear that this sworn translator was all right. Then the British consul had to swear that the certificate of baptism was all right, and finally the French Minister of Foreign Affairs had to take oath that the British consul was all right. For all of which, as a matter of course, I had to pay.

"And here," he continued, "is the case we have just left. Both are beyond fifty, yet both must have the consent of their parents, or must show good reason why it cannot be obtained. The man's parents are dead, but he had to prove it, which was very difficult. The woman has a mother living, but she is eighty-seven and in her dotage. Nevertheless she must consent, and all these preliminaries had been arranged at last, but only after a three months' campaign. Our friend was indignant, and we rather suspect that his antipathy to the French marriage laws, and his own painful experience with them, had a little to do in evoking his consent to the union of the couple we had just visited.

About dusk we saw the school-children returning home, looking quite as tidy as the little toddlers in our own cities, and all, like our own, carrying their little bags of school-books with them. Still later we entered a common lodging-house, and our guide introduced us to a converted absinthe-drinker. Some years ago he drank thirty-six glasses of that nerve-destroying decoction at a single sitting. Result, three months in hospital and a wrecked constitution. Instead of inflating himself with drink he now inflates with wind the organ of an adjacent mission hall and peddles oranges for a living. The neighborhood about here was very hard, and we rather suspected that our friend had hitched on to his hard-looking convert just then to keep us in countenance while we passed through it. But soon we found ourselves in the grand place of the Hotel de Ville, and here, after a cup of coffee together, we took passage for our respective homes.

HENRY TUCKLEY.

Jews, Not Hebrews.

Jewish Tidings.

The word Hebrew now has but one meaning, and that in a dead language. We are Jews, because we are adherents of the Jewish religion. Our religion is the only mark of distinction between us and other citizens of this country. There is an impression in the mind of many non-Jews, and even some Jews, that it is courtesy to call us Hebrews, thus implying that there is some stigma attached to the name of Jew. The Tidings is constantly seeking to remove this impression. We are Jews, not Hebrews, nor Israelites.

Sent C. O. D.

Philadelphia Record.

An up-town man has not got his wife's Christmas present yet. She sent it on Saturday to his office, but it was C. O. D., and he was not there when it was delivered.